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When the War Drum Throbs in the Theatre

Barries Sympathy and Charm In Two Plays Make Strong Appeal—Others Presented Are Mostly Mud and Fluff

By Heywood Broun

DRUMBEATS very largely drown the drama. While perhaps one long play and two short ones of notable worth have been produced during the war, theatrical standards throughout the world have been lowered. In our judgment the three notable war plays are "Moloch," by Beulah Dix; "The New Word" and "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals," by James Barrie.

Heywood Broun

We never liked "Moloch" much. In its expression of a passionate hatred of war it was often unfair. Moreover, in the midst of a world conflict which absorbed the interests of every one the author adopted the doubtful dramatic expedient of dealing with war in the abstract. Her contending forces were the Reds and the Blues, or something of the kind, when all her audiences were composed of people who wanted to know about the English and the French and the Belgians and the Russians and the Germans. And yet, no matter how much anybody cared to quarrel with the methods of Miss Dix or her propagandic point of view, there was no denying the flash and brilliance of some of her scenes. No audience will ever forget the wonderful moment in the play when the soldier, discovering that his officer had been murdered, throws back the curtains and cries, "Who has done this?" The scene finally wound up in a more or less melodramatic burst of energy in which the house was battered down, but the moment of suspense in which everybody wondered what the soldiers would do was one of the big seconds of modern drama. Again the author achieved a remarkably poignant effect at the end of her play, when the armies, now thoroughly disillusionized, are marching off to a second war to the same tunes which blared excitement and enthusiasm earlier in the play.

The merit of Miss Dix's play lay in the eloquent expression of a deep passion, a hatred of war. There is no passion in Barrie, but there is extraordinary sympathy and felicity of mood and expression. We wish it were possible to write two lines upon another about Barrie without using the word "charm," but, even if you close all the doors, it will pop in through a window like Peter Pan. The more striking play of the two is "The New Word." In this Barrie deals humorously, but altogether sympathetically, with British reticence. He writes a scene in which a father is saying goodby to his son who is off to the wars. Both want to part with an expression of affection, and yet both dread it like the very devil. Barrie is able to show that the reticence of the British, which many of us mistake for mere swank, is no such thing but an exaggerated fear of intruding an emotion upon somebody else. We rode once in a train with four young English second lieutenants. It was a five-hour journey, and yet the young soldiers exchanged not a single word. Now, not one of these subalterns was in the least conscious of his own importance. All had seen service in a war whose casualty lists say "Unless otherwise specified—second lieutenant." But each feared to address a remark to any one of his companions for fear of intruding upon a well preserved privacy.

In "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals" Barrie told the story of a charwoman who had no man at the front and invented one only to have him come back and confront her with the false claim. Of course, it all ended by his adopting the old lady as a mother, and it is to her his medals and mementoes come when he is killed. This story is ordinary enough, but it was illumined with rare humor and a skilful grasp of moods. It went at times just a little deeper than the usual Barrie soundings. Perhaps Mr. Barrie knows that when a child laughs his next reaction is likely to be tears. At any rate, Barrie is able to destroy the balance of his audience by making his people laugh, and then, when he has them plastic, he finds no great difficulty in making them cry.

It is not a difficult matter to make people in a theatre cry. Even cheap and shoddy expressions of certain sentiments will suffice while folk are in the mood, but the author who captures an audience in that way must pay a price. When they have done crying and the curtain is down and the illusion gone they will hate him. He has tricked them. But Barrie has literary as well as purely dramatic charm. You may if you will read the lines which made you tearful in the theatre and it is probable that the decision will be "I had a perfect right to cry at that."

Barrie's success in treating the war dramatically, as exemplified in these two little plays, is largely due to his method of isolating little sections of it. He does not treat of the great tendencies of the conflict, but of its reaction on small groups. Obviously this is the only possible rather than dramatic. In its larger aspects it is too vast to be brought within the walls of a theatre. After all, a contest between two men is more dramatic than a battle with a million on either side, even if it were possible to portray such a battle.

Curiously enough, many of the war dramatists have not been content to take their stories off the battlefield. A number of plays have invaded the trenches. There was, for instance, "An American Ace." in which the audience saw troops go over the top, an air raid and a battle in the clouds. Two of the scenes were mechanically ineffective, but, as a matter of fact, the most realistic one was the least dramatic. While it is true that the supporting artillery was somewhat close to the infantry, the scene in which the American troops attacked the Boches did have at least a semblance of the roar of battle. Indeed, the noise was so loud, the dust so thick and the smell of powder so poignant that everybody sitting near the stage needed a dugout rather more than an orchestra stage. The playwright succeeded in making the spectators so distinctly uncomfortable that they didn't give a rap how his story came out if only the din would cease.

It is probably fair to say, then, that in the countries which have seen most of the war there is no desire to view over-faithful slices of life in the theatre. The revolt against naturalism is not founded entirely on the horrors of war. Both here and in England the conformity of opinion has not a little to do with turning dramatists away from serious plays. It is difficult, of course, to write a serious modern play without touching upon the war, and as soon as the dramatist reaches the conflict his opinion is already formed. Most people in both countries are thinking alike, anyway, and the minorities are largely compelled in one way or another to conform. There is, therefore, almost no field for the conflict so necessary to drama. If a playwright brings a pacifist on the stage in the first act the audience is not likely to become unduly interested in his progress, since they know perfectly well that he will be converted some little time before the final curtain. In Lavedan's "Service," which Mrs. Fiske produced here, the conversion was long delayed and so insufficiently motivated that the audiences would have none of it.

Of course, Germans are even more out of the question than pacifists for dramatic purposes. With the exception of Shaw, no English or American writer has been able to summon enough tolerance or good humor in drawing a Teuton to make him anything but a lay figure of villany. And yet "The Inca of Perusalem," with all its restraint, was a more damning portrait of Wilhelm than "The Beast of Berlin" or "To Hell with the Kaiser" or any of the more simple and direct attacks upon the German ruler.

As a rule, the most unpleasant thing a dramatist can do to anybody whom he does not like is to satirize him. Few of our authors can use satire now. It demands a frigid impersonal attitude which will be difficult to attain until some time after the war. The failure of satire when allowed to boil over was illustrated in "Her Country." This little play, which came here by way of England, undertook to reveal the life of the German at home. It began interestingly and amusingly as the authors fenced about with the subject driving the rapier home again and again. Presently, however, Berier lost his temper. The rapier was not enough. He discarded it for an axe, a crowbar and a pair of brass knuckles. Then he went to work again, but it was much too bloody a job to be accepted as satire. It is possible to write satire on war subjects if the Germans are rigorously excluded. "General Post" was an amusing study of the breakdown of British social prejudices under war conditions. It failed to attract attention here.

A very fruitful and popular field of war play lies in melodrama. We have seen no first class war melodrama on the stage in the last three seasons, but there have been a number of successful ones. Some have dared the difficulties of representing battles, fights with submarines and such like, but all these things have been kept to a small scale by tying them up closely to the fortune of an individual, and usually an obscure one. Thus Roi Cooper Megrue placed the credit of winning the Battle of the Marne to his hero, who was a young English officer, if we remember correctly. Again, if our memory is not at fault, he won the battle to please a young woman whom he wanted to marry. This may seem a little far-fetched, but it is sound melodramatic treatment. One cannot picture the spirit of a nation in a melodrama. As a matter of fact, Megrue's play has served as a model for a long line of war melodrama.

It is probable that the only serious plays to be seen here next season will concern the war. As long as the war remains the one outstanding problem of the world it will be impossible to make audiences display deep interest in any other problem. It is possible, however, to make the audience forget the war for a little while by asking that it consider something trivial. We will have many melodramas and farces, and perhaps a very few serious plays about the war. But if we are at all like our cousins across the ocean, which we used to call the big pond, the chief distraction while the period of distress continues will be the musical show. If people want to forget what is going on, and there seems to be no reasonable doubt that they do, they want a show which tinkles. That seems to be the only way to keep the big guns out of our ears.